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Old Industries, Old Conflicts: The Significance of American Epic Novels

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"The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer. It has never yet melted."

– D.H. Lawrence

What lies at the core of American identity and culture has been the subject of numerous fictional works, and often defies their attempts to reach deeper interpretations of it. That said, the complexity and creativity of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, and Don DeLillo's *Underworld* in addressing this topic are undeniable. These epic novels are largely unparalleled in literary prowess, showcasing some of the most powerful imagery, description, and symbolism ever committed to paper by American authors. More importantly, these works provide incredible insight into and strong indictments of this nation and the people within its borders. What these novels demonstrate is at once unsettling, horrifying, captivating, and ultimately edifying: that America is a place where questions are rarely answered, where redemption is impossible, where good and evil are entirely relative concepts, where isolation is one's natural state, and where violence reigns supreme.

Ambiguity in a variety of forms plays a major role in all three of these novels. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* are closely linked by this theme (and a number of others I will discuss) due to the former's direct influence on the latter, while *Underworld* is separated by its more literal and structural brand of ambiguity. That said, in *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian*, the simplest ambiguity is that of place and location. Though there are a number of specific places mentioned throughout the Pequod's quest, these often serve more as general reference points for the ship's position rather than the sort of locations meant to be charted. Indeed, Ishmael states that Queequeg's home island is not found on any map and qualifies this by stating that "true places never are" (67). Similarly, Vince Brewton argues that while "McCarthy supplies the particulars of geography," the Glanton gang in *Blood Meridian* seems lost in "a collapse of time and space…in a kind of no-place of desolation," a sentiment

that the novel's landscapes echo (131). At one point, McCarthy places the Glanton gang in the first of many anonymous tracts of wilderness to great effect:

> All night sheetlightning quaked sourceless to the west beyond the midnight thunderheads making a bluish day of the desert, the mountains on the sudden skyline stark and black and livid like a land of some other order out there whose true geology was not stone but fear. The thunder moved up from the southwest and lightning lit the desert all about them, blue and barren, great clanging reaches ordered up out of the absolute night like some demon kingdom summoned up or changeling land that come the day would leave them neither trace nor smoke nor ruin more than a troubling dream (49).

On one level, there are the simpler parallels of the liminal spaces occupied by the Pequod whalers and the Glanton gang: the ocean and desert are often devoid of distinguishing features (the former in particular), greatly conceal the extent to which life survives within them, and present undeniable danger to any who enter.

On another level, Melville and McCarthy both allude to the fear that accompanies this ambiguity, urging readers to "mark how closely [sailors] hug their ship and only coast along her sides" when they "in a dead calm bathe in the open sea" (367). However, Melville's assertion about "true places" belies a fondness for those spaces where true wildness endures in the face of an ever-civilizing world, something the settings of *Blood Meridian* lack (although judging by McCarthy's other western works, this is a choice likely made to better fit the novel's bloodstained soul rather than devalue the power or allure of wildernesses). For his part, DeLillo's settings lack much of the fear wrapped up in Melville's and McCarthy's, but still possess a great amount of ambiguity, such as when Klara Sax "stood on the roof watching storm clouds build bluish and hard-edged, like weather on some remote coast, a sky that seemed too

lush and wild to pass this way" (746). Though this scene is set in a particular city it lacks features that set it apart from any other urban locale, illustrating Klara's liminal state within her own life and alluding to the interchangeability of urban life that DeLillo puts forth throughout the novel. In light of this, these passages deal with the perceived value inherent in untouched landscapes, a notion found in every tier of American society. Furthermore, they highlight the erosion of individuality and agency that can accompany the ambiguity of becoming lost in such unsullied places, a harsh fact that would appear to contradict the cornerstone American ideals of rugged individualism and divinely awarded freedom. Indeed, it would seem that this land is very well suited – one might even say designed – for stripping its inhabitants of the liberty and sense of self we hold dear.

The ambiguity of events and characters is another important aspect of this theme though it plays a greater role in *Underworld* than in the other two novels. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael's past is left to conjecture – his identity is confined to his opening instruction to "call [him] Ishmael" and his motivations for taking a job on the Pequod are equally vague (21). Likewise, the particulars of his fate after surviving the final encounter with the titular whale are never detailed and neither is his age when narrating the story itself, though it's safe to assume he is older than during his time on the whaling ship. The protagonist of *Blood Meridian* is afforded even less, referred to simply as the kid and never being placed in the context of a past or a readily discernable present. Justin Evans notes that at the novel's end, the kid has "in all likelihood been raped and murdered by Judge Holden," certainly a reasonable interpretation given the Judge's depravity and the reaction of the next man who goes to use the outhouse where the kid runs into the Judge, but even this is never explicitly shown. Evans also probes the ambiguity of the novel's epilogue which might simply depict a man putting up a fence, "progressing over the

plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground" which he makes with "an implement with two handles…striking the fire out of the rock which God [had] put there," or something more divine as he suggests (McCarthy 351). McCarthy also takes this a step further than Melville, largely avoiding any description of his characters' inner thoughts with the notable exception of the Judge (although even he states his contemplations aloud rather than McCarthy expositing them himself via his omniscient narration).

DeLillo also tends to avoid providing insight into the minds of his characters, instead rattling off details of their words, actions, and appearances and occasionally noting an indirect motivation for one or more of these, as when the narrator notes that Mays is trying to get "some catchy tune he's been hearing on the radio lately" out of his head (22). Manx Martin is described as "usually sliding in [to his home] unannounced, standing and glaring, stuck to the wall like he wandered in the wrong door and needed to work out the details of his mistake," a tendency never fully explained despite his occupation as a petty thief being made clear (140). Other characters, such as the street preacher and the Italian stone carvers who built the high-rise rooftops Klara Sax admires, are entirely mysterious aside from their minimal presence in DeLillo's world. Additionally, the novel's events in general are somewhat ambiguous given DeLillo's unorthodox, roughly chronologically reverse style and the book's tendency "to be both within history and outside of it" (Parrish 700). Perhaps the greatest ambiguity of the novel is the significance of the famous Thomson home run which serves as a connecting thread for much of the narrative. The only interpretation the novel supplies is through Brian Glassic, one of Nick Shay's coworkers, who wonders if it was simply "the last time people spontaneously went out of their houses for something. Some wonder, some amazement" (94).

James Annesley also notes how DeLillo's "emphasis on covert linkages builds upon the preoccupation with conspiracy" that defines so much of the novel (86). Secrets surround numerous events in *Underworld* and represent DeLillo's version of the more figurative ambiguity present throughout the other two novels. These covert linkages include the lineage of the coveted Thomson baseball; the mysterious ship rumored to be carrying drugs and linked to the CIA (it turns out to be carrying human waste and caught up in a series of strange circumstances); whether nuclear fallout has been drifting away from test ranges in Nevada and New Mexico (a question taken straight out of real life whose answer has turned out to be 'yes' in recent years); various love affairs; the identities of the Texas Highway Killer and Moonman 137, both of which are eventually revealed; and the fate of Nick and Matt's father who the former believes was murdered due to connections to some sort of illicit activity.

Modern American culture is often marked by secrets and conspiracy theories, something DeLillo expertly taps into, and thus it seems that his purpose in incorporating secrets so consistently might be to more closely imitate real life. Matt Shay does reflect quite accurately at one point that the power of an event "can flow from its unresolvable heart, all the cruel and elusive elements that don't add up, and it makes you…tell stories to yourself" (454-455). More than that, the obsession with secrets in *Underworld* underscores the fact that little seems to actually transpire within its narrative compared to the lengthy *Moby-Dick* and surprisingly dense *Blood Meridian.* Furthermore, DeLillo's characters do not come across as nearly as active in their destinies and environments compared to McCarthy's scalp hunters who ultimately feel like vehicles for brutal violence and Melville's whalers who are merely tools at the disposal of Ahab's fixation on the white whale. Given this trait of *Underworld* and it being the most recent of these three novels (both in publishing and setting), DeLillo seems to be hinting that America

has transitioned from being a place of destructive action to one of destructive inaction, never truly abandoning its fierce genesis.

On top of all this, Susan VanZanten Gallagher draws attention to the ambiguity "that characterize[s] Melville's concept of the prophet," an important aspect of characters such as Elijah and Fedallah, with the former obliquely referencing Ahab's own ambiguous past and character at several points and the latter appearing almost miraculously aboard the Pequod after stowing away (12). This concept also readily applies to the Judge in *Blood Meridian* with Holden, though being explicitly physically described by the kid, appearing out of thin air to help the Glanton gang withstand an attack by Apaches and possessing an enigmatic intellectual sophistication totally unique among the scalp hunters. Moreover, the kid notes that the Judge has not aged at all upon meeting him almost thirty years after the novel's main events, potentially opening the door to the Judge being immortal. All told, this layer of ambiguity in these novels demonstrates that the traditional American perception of individual identity as paramount is deeply flawed, and that our society routinely sacrifices true knowledge of one another in favor of some measure of safety, or else out of simple expedience.

These novels also feature an ambiguity of appearances via the objectives of the focal characters, those being whales in *Moby-Dick*, Apaches in *Blood Meridian*, and the baseball in *Underworld*. Because the Apaches have no symbolic significance, their ambiguity is simply due to the fact that the Glanton gang can – and does – pass off the scalp of anyone with sufficiently dark skin and long hair as having belonged to an Apache. Moby Dick and the baseball are far more cryptic by virtue of the symbolism of their white color, a topic I will address later in relation to violence. However, Ishmael observes a plethora of "hieroglyphical" marks on Moby Dick's hide, a fascinating image that is also entirely believable given that they are surely the

result of abundant scars stemming from the creature's age and aggression (277). Ishmael later asserts that there are "gestures" in the movement of a whale's fluke that are "wholly inexplicable" and "akin to Free-Mason signs and symbols," calling into question the whales' sentience and place in the world and imbuing these animals with new meaning (338). This is also done with the doubloon Ahab nails to the Pequod's mast whose "strange figures and inscriptions" captivate him nearly as much as the white whale himself (381). McCarthy and DeLillo incorporate this trope to varying extents with their landscapes, although DeLillo subverts it as much as he embraces it, blithely noting "how human it is to see a thing as something else" after describing the New Mexican desert as all "hardpan and sky and a wafer trace of mountain, low and crouched out there…cat-shaped, catamount" (64). On one hand, this tendency of these novels somewhat demythologizes America by using such surreal language to describe decidedly real animals and backdrops. In a sense, the prolific ambiguity of these works also thwarts attempts to make any larger meanings of their contents and the realities of American life and history and can even be interpreted as arguing that there are none. However, it seems absurd to embrace this viewpoint and therefore disregard these novels given the incredible depth and detail contained in them and the placement of the ambiguities I discussed.

On the topic of redemption, *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* are once again closely tied while *Underworld* departs significantly from their styles. From the outset, Melville and McCarthy foreshadow the inability of most of their characters to find redemption for their deeds, though Melville's approach is slightly more lenient as Ishmael seems to largely put his past behind him. Melville's protagonist, while meditating on the inescapability of death, reflects that "it's too late to make any improvements now. The universe is finished; the copestone is on, and the chips were carted off a million years ago" (28). McCarthy also lends an inevitability to the

failure of redemption when he describes the kid as having "all history present in [his] visage, the child the father of the man" (3). These passages simultaneously illustrate the deep similarity of worldviews in Melville and McCarthy and allude to the relative innocence that allows Ishmael to escape with his life and soul intact, a luxury the kid is not and was never to be afforded. Both novels also subtly connect religion to redemption's impossibility, questioning its often-unquestioned merit in American society and implying a divinity to their characters' damnation. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael openly wonders how one can reconcile Bildad's Quaker pacifism with his having "illimitably invaded the Atlantic and Pacific and…spilled [tons] and [tons] of leviathan gore," a fascinating contradiction indeed (83). In *Blood Meridian*, the ex-priest Tobin proclaims to the kid that the entire gang has entered into a "terrible covenant" with the Judge, sealing their fate long before it ever comes to fruition (132). However, Julian Rice cites the *Literary History of the United States* as assuming that the tragic hero "is redeemed by a vision of divine beneficence," that beneficence being clarity regarding Ahab's true nature, and it certainly appears Ishmael achieves just this (445). This directly contrasts with the other Pequod whalers and the Glanton gang (with the exception of the Judge), all of whom eventually die or are killed in distinctly unsavory ways.

Moby-Dick and *Blood Meridian* also probe the failure of redemption through their dominant characters – Ahab and the Judge respectively. After successfully killing a massive whale, an event one would expect to evoke at least some levity in the captain, "some vague dissatisfaction, or impatience, or despair, seemed working in [Ahab]; as if the sight of that dead body reminded him that Moby Dick was yet to be slain" (262). Towards the novel's end, Ahab reveals that he's spent less than three years in the last forty ashore with his family and Ishmael states that "joy and sorrow, hope and fear, seemed ground to finest dust…in the clamped mortar

of Ahab's iron soul" (468). To his dying breath, the Pequod's captain refuses to disabuse himself and absolve his crew of his obsession with the white whale. Moreover, he does so willingly and actively rather than resigning himself to a fate appointed to him by God, by the sea, or even by his own past choices. Unlike Ahab, McCarthy's Judge Holden is informed by his preternatural wisdom and abundant insights into humanity, and it is these which prophesize the gang's dissolution and the kid's condemnation in its wake. After making camp amid the ruins of some long-vanished indigenous people, the Judge asks the other scalp hunters, "If God meant to interfere in the degeneracy of man would he not have done so by now? Wolves cull themselves…And is the race of man not more predacious yet?" (153). Less than halfway through the novel the Judge understands the scalp hunters are doomed and redemption is far from the gang's grasp or that of any individuals in it. Accordingly, the novel's dying chapters paint the West as a land of death which the kid is condemned to wander through, such a fate being the inevitable and only consequence of his transgressions in McCarthy's eyes. More importantly, any effort by the kid to absolve himself, such as his soul-baring to an old woman who turns out to be a long-dead mummy and quasi-reverence for tales of entire herds of bison slaughtered and left to rot, are entirely in vain.

In *Underworld*, redemption is a more figurative element that fails not because the characters or society try unsuccessfully to attain it, but because they make no effort to seek it out in the first place. In the opening section entitled "The Triumph of Death," Cotter Martin is caught in a struggle with Bill Waterson for the famous home run ball after it is hit into the stands. Interestingly, DeLillo awards this duel the same weight as any violent encounter in *Moby-Dick* or *Blood Meridian*: "The action of [Cotter's] hand is as old as he is. It seems he has been sending out this hand for one thing or another since the minute he shot out of infancy" (47-48).

Though Cotter never functions as an antagonist and has no blood on his hands, unlike nearly every other character in the other two novels, it seems DeLillo means to depict him analogously to those men; His description of Cotter is certainly reminiscent of McCarthy's initial description of the kid. Similarly, after Klara Sax details the complicated relationships she had with her mother and childhood friend Rochelle, she realizes "she could never again have a friend like Rochelle or a mother like her mother" (400). Indeed, every character who Klara encounters seems to pass out of her life as easily as they come into it, leading her down a path of relative instability and chaos. Nick Shay's wife carries on a secret affair with a friend of his while Nick futilely wrestles with the unknown circumstances of his father's fate and visits his old lover Klara with no clear purpose. Every notable character in *Underworld* seems to experience a similar displacement of self, accumulating experiences and making decisions that clutter and pollute their lives, prompting them to isolate themselves by trying (and usually failing) to remake their identities or heading for "a white space on the map" (451).

For DeLillo, redemption has far more to do with saving one's life, rather than one's soul, from turmoil and destruction, something his characters consistently fail to do. However, he makes it abundantly clear that this is just as much a societal failure as an individual one. *Underworld* is peppered with images of obnoxiously self-effacing consumerism, often in the form of roadside billboards or TV commercials, that distract the characters from their true purposes and the reader from the merits of the novel's world (make no mistake, this effort by DeLillo is entirely intentional, not the result of poor writing). One of the last images of the novel is a landfill "jammed to capacity, [where] gas keeps rising from the great earthen berm… [producing] a wavering across the land and sky that deepens the aura of sacred work…like a fable in the writhing air of some ghost civilization, a shimmer of desert ruin." (809). Whereas

the failure of redemption in *Moby-Dic*k and *Blood Meridian* leads to the literal destruction of one's life by violence, in *Underworld* it leads to the figurative destruction of one's life amid a tide of waste. Taken in the chronological order of their publishing, these novels suggest that America has gone from a land of swift death from savagery to a place of slow corrosion disguised as enrichment, and that redemption is at best a fool's errand and at worst a lie.

In *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian,* America is a place where good is largely absent and evil, though seemingly bottomless at times, is far more three-dimensional than we tend to assume. In the former novel, Peleg paints a captivating and deceptive picture of Ahab early on, calling him a "grand, un-godly, god-like man" who's "been in colleges, as well as [among] the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than waves" (87). Ahab's uncommon background is evident throughout the novel in his physical capability (impressive given the rigor of his occupation, his being around 60 years old, the loss of his leg, and the state of medicine and health maintenance in his time) and mental surety. Despite his obsession and obvious inability to accept the amputation of his leg, Ahab is not prone to arrogance or complacency as many villains tend to be and typically exhibits disregard for the safety of his men only to an extent that allows them to carry out their inherently hazardous jobs. Ahab's description also presents an eerie parallel with the Judge whose far greater capacity for malevolence lies in his innate otherness and the dichotomy between his intelligence and total lack of conventional morality.

Certain physical elements of the Judge provide clues to his true nature. Upon first seeing the Judge at a Christian revival, the kid describes him as a hairless albino "close on to seven feet in height and…smoking a cigar even in this nomadic house of God" (6). He also notes the "serene and strangely childlike" quality of his face and small size of his hands, attributes disturbing for a character with such a depth of depravity and which also provide an unnerving

juxtaposition with the kid's own youth and inexperience (7). The Judge also displays physical abilities far beyond the men around him, lifting and throwing a large chunk of meteorite and not having aged a day when the kid encounters him in a bar in 1878, almost thirty years after his exploits with the Glanton gang. Thus, McCarthy not only asserts that the power of evil far exceeds our own, but that it is ageless and inescapable. Furthermore, as Brent Cusher contends, the Judge "is a richly composed portrait of human evil…[but] in other ways… possessed of a remarkable degree of cultivation and humanity" (223). Like Ahab, the Judge possesses knowledge beyond that of his compatriots, interacting with the gang members and other characters quite learnedly on topics as varied as the Bible, war, evolution, geography, geology, sociology, literature, anthropology, destiny, and philosophy. Furthermore, just as Ahab personifies the stoicism and unswerving purpose residing in every man aboard the Pequod, so too does the Judge embody the ruthless, immoral violence that lies at the heart of the Glanton gang. In the end, however, the Judge is far more villainous than Ahab, murdering in horrific ways with the same detachment Ahab feels when hunting whales and implicitly committing other heinous acts such as the rape, molestation, and murder of children. More importantly, Ahab ultimately perishes as a consequence of his obsession with the white whale, while the Judge seems not to even age let alone fall to any act of violence. Thus, Melville's America is one where evil is constituted far more by the absence of good, when the needle of one's moral compass never "recovers [its] original virtue thus marred or lost" after a good storm of the heart and mind (453). For McCarthy, American evil is defined by total, unstoppable predaciousness visited upon those wholly undeserving of such tragedy and horror.

DeLillo's conception of evil in *Underworld* is far more mundane and absent than Melville and McCarthy. The opening section features a fictionalized J. Edgar Hoover receiving

news of a successful Soviet nuclear test, an alarming development that physically and mentally unsettles the CIA director, and is then promptly abandoned by DeLillo for the remainder of the novel. In eschewing a stereotypical depiction of the Soviet Union as an omnipresent, existential threat to individual fibers of American existence, DeLillo appears to concur with Melville and McCarthy that this country's greatest evil is still very much within its own borders. Unlike the other authors, however, DeLillo does not depict blind obsession or unfettered violence, but instead the far more modern mix of banality and disregard, as witnessed in the Texas Highway Killer and nuclear testing, as the source of American evil. The Texas Highway Killer is a serial murderer who is depicted outright (rather than being mentioned or thought about by another character) only once for a handful of pages in which he carries on an almost painfully mundane conversation with a friend of his. By the novel's end, the killer has seemingly vanished, leaving the country to wonder if his reign of terror is truly over or if he's "still out there, driving and looking, not done with this thing at all but only waiting" (807). The man holds none of the intelligence or freedom from the law that Ahab and the Judge possess, and little of their cunning besides; the serial killer's evil lies in his anonymity and the perfect randomness of his depredations although they, unlike those of Judge Holden, have clear boundaries.

The evil of nuclear testing, as DeLillo is careful to point out, lies in its disregard for the safety of American citizens rather than the general ethics of such weapons. While working at a test site, Matt Shay and a number of other minor characters confront the terrible possibility that nuclear fallout from testing ranges has been drifting over American towns for years or decades, posing serious health risks to those communities. Worse, the novel heavily implies that the American government has either lied outright about these occurrences or attempted to cover them up. In the end, *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* depict a vision of America awash in

depravity and baseness whereas *Underworld* illustrates an America slowly wasting away on a mountain of deceit and shadowed wrongdoing. Moreover, these novels prove that America is a place where good is far rarer and more powerless than our society lets on, and where evil is quite adept at disguise and deception.

Though it is often tied to their depictions of violence, isolation is still a powerful force on its own in these novels. On top of that, this motif represents the greatest overlap between these works. On a simpler level, the novels' landscapes (natural or manmade) reveal and reflect the isolation inside the characters. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael says of the ocean that "the awful loneliness is intolerable" owing to the "intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity" (367). Similarly in *Blood Meridian*, the West is a place of isolation long before the Glanton scalp hunters embark on their crusade, where out of the sunsets rise "little desert nighthawks like fugitives from some great fire at the earth's end" (23). Though the landscapes in *Underworld* tend to be artificial and therefore cut its characters off more from nature and unfettered interactions with one another rather than the entirety of the world or themselves, the presence of isolation is significant. In the opening baseball game, "lone-wolf calls from high in the stands" are audible as opposed to the actual wolves one might hear around McCarthy's campfires or the spouting of whales on Melville's seas (34). For much of the novel, DeLillo surrounds his characters with massive structures of metal, stone, and glass in the form of buildings, city streets, and even massive decommissioned aircraft. Even when they find themselves out in nature, DeLillo still describes the settings with a sense of claustrophobia and constraint: "They walked out past a large parabolic dune and it was so draggingly hot out [there] that the air seemed a form of physical hindrance" (406).

Melville and McCarthy also add a layer of semi-sentience to their landscapes, as if they were aware, and critical, of the isolation at the core of the whalers' and scalp hunters' quests. In *Moby-Dick*, rows of cormorants perch on the Pequod's stays "as though they deemed [the] ship…a thing appointed to desolation, and therefore a fit roosting place for their homeless selves" (215). At one point as the Glanton gang rides across the Mexican desert the sand under the horses' hooves "flared and drew back again" as though "in the transit of those riders were a thing so profoundly terrible as to register even to the uttermost granulation of reality" (258). *Underworld* lacks this element of isolation, a telling choice by DeLillo which appears to indicate that Americans are now so cut off from anything they didn't create or think up that they're ultimately ignorant of and sheltered from the full depth of their isolation. Perhaps even more crucially, the harsh realities of these novels' landscapes never change, subliminally asserting that isolation is a given in America and that any attempt to transcend it is futile.

On a more complex level, all three works display profound isolation in the characters themselves, often before their journeys have even begun. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael admits almost immediately that he takes to the ocean as an escape from the unconquerable isolation he carries within himself, going so far as to call it his "substitute for pistol and ball" (21). For his part, Ahab is easily the most isolated of Melville's cast, his life driven by the movements of two beasts: the literal one which he pursues (largely on instinct or simple understandings of the movements of others of Moby Dick's species) and the one which has moved into his soul and drives his every decision. The contrast is even more stark when one considers that, aside from his obsession with the white whale, Ahab is a capable and stalwart captain whose leadership is predicated on meaningful words and deeds rather than pomp and circumstance. Thus, Ahab's

isolation from his men stems from their lacking his deeply personal involvement in killing Moby Dick and his status as their leader.

Blood Meridian takes it a step further with neither an omniscient narrator nor the kid himself offering even this basic insight into his motivations for joining the Glanton gang. McCarthy doesn't even reveal the kid's proper name and, as Melville does with Ahab, only indirectly makes the kid's age known. Indeed, many of the novel's characters go unnamed or are typically addressed or referred to by an alternate title, such as "the Judge" instead of "Holden" or "the expriest" rather than "Tobin." Though DeLillo's approach is often contrary to Melville's and McCarthy's (the latter especially) given the dearth of detail he provides about his characters, they are still trapped within themselves, quietly but obstinately refusing to change the courses of their lives and endlessly nostalgic for "the moments when history was horrifying and the days in which they dreaded the apocalypse" (Mraović-O'Hare 213).

What's more, the isolation of these characters is not confined to themselves, but extends out to encompass every man and woman in their sphere of influence and beyond. Ironically, just after meeting Queequeg, Ishmael observes a group of whalers in a pub sitting in utter silence despite sharing an intimate space and the protagonist's assertions that they have all accomplished harrowing feats at sea. This is mirrored in the nigh on religious stoicism and verbal economy of McCarthy's scalp hunters aside, of course, from the Judge's sermon-like displays of knowledge. The Pequod's crew is also cloistered from humanity at large, with Ishmael stating at one point that the ship sailed on "as if remorselessly commissioned to some vengeful deed" (377). McCarthy nearly quotes this passage when he describes the Glanton gang traveling through the night like "a patrol condemned to ride out some ancient curse" (157). On the other hand, where Melville and McCarthy embrace an externally appointed view of individual and group isolation,

DeLillo depicts it as the product of our own artificiality. In the opening chapter, DeLillo wastes no time establishing the meaningless but almost omnipotent nature of American commercialism:

> The pages keep falling. Baby food, instant coffee, encyclopedias and cars, waffle irons and shampoos and blended whiskeys…. how the dazzle of a Packard car is repeated in the feature story about the art treasures of the Prado. It is all part of the same thing. Rubens and Titian and Playtex and Motorola. And here's a picture of Sinatra himself sitting in a nightclub in Nevada with Ava Gardner and would you check that cleavage… In a country that's in a hurry to make the future, the names attached to the products are an enduring reassurance. Johnson and Johnson and Quaker State and RCA Victor and Burlington Mills and Bristol-Myers and General Mills. These are the venerated emblems of a burgeoning economy, easier to identify than the names of battlefields or dead presidents (39).

Aside from the always interesting premise of simultaneously saying so much and so little, a practice DeLillo has clearly mastered, this and similar passages throughout the novel portray an America walled away behind an impenetrable barrier of consumerism. Even further, DeLillo makes the final resting place of these items abundantly clear – the foundation of yet another stratum of waste. Ultimately, these novels demonstrate that America is a place where isolation from oneself and one's fellows is the norm, one that can never be contravened. More than that, all three authors seem to contend that isolation is not merely the result of our choices and activities as a species, but a precondition of existence that awaits us all before we ever enter the world.

However, the most dangerous and dehumanizing effect of isolation in these novels is the hard fact that "long exile from…civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which

God placed him…savagery" (Melville 245). To truly understand and appreciate these novels and the country they comment on, one must come to terms with their profound, prolific violence. This motif is consistently associated with the color white (represented by the white whale and Ahab's white prosthetic leg in *Moby-Dick*, the Judge in *Blood Meridian*, and the baseball and nuclear testing in *Underworld)*, given the color's proximity to violence, explicit or otherwise, and the fact that it's never mentioned in any of these novels outside that context. This is an interesting and subversive choice given that white is typically a marker of purity and/or goodness. By that token, it seems that these authors all agree that, just like America's people, its violence refuses to be contained and routinely defies any expectations of it. Certainly, *Moby-Dick* and *Blood Meridian* never fail to deliver in this respect. Though not as violent as McCarthy's scalp hunters, the crew of the Pequod still peddle severed heads of unknown origins and proudly display trophies of their kills. The whalers also display a distinct nonchalance regarding the violence of their occupation even during the aftermath of their hunts. After harpooning a whale in such a way that its heart bursts, causing "gush after gush of clotted red gore" to shoot forth from its blowhole, Stubb simply tips the ashes out of his smoked out pipe into the water and stands on deck "thoughtfully eying the vast corpse he had made" (257). Likewise, upon discovering their missing scouts naked, disemboweled, and skewered upside down over fires "until their heads had charred and the brains bubbled in the skulls and steam sang from their noseholes," the remaining scalp hunters appear no more troubled than if they had encountered bad weather (237).

Conversely, *Underworld* lacks much of this overt violence, though not all of it; at one point a pair of men eat at a particular restaurant solely because a mobster had been shot there in the recent past. To be sure, the most explicitly violent passage in the book is the description of

the painting "The Triumph of Death" reproduced in the Life magazine J. Edgar Hoover pores over during the opening baseball game. Instead, DeLillo asserts that America has devised ritualistic facets to itself as spiritual successors to our bloody past. Indeed, he describes the opening game as "the furrow of destruction" and portrays the West, traditionally an icon of American freedom and beauty, as a wasteland where we prepare and store the potential demise of our species in the form of nuclear weapons (28). Taken together, these novels indicate that violence utterly lacks the glory and romanticism often attributed to it in America and is an unavoidable fact of American life and "of all human experience" (Phillips 439).

Just as important as the brutality of violence is how rapidly one can become accustomed to and an agent of it. Kevin Hayes posits that by trying on Queequeg's poncho, Ishmael sees "how easily he could slip into a state of savagery," something also visible with the kid in *Blood Meridian* in whose mind "broods already a taste for mindless violence" while he's still only a child (50; McCarthy 3). To be sure, Ishmael actively pursues a job aboard the Pequod and willingly throws in with the goals of the men aboard, just as the kid joins the Glanton gang with no reservations (though he does not exhibit the remorselessly bloodthirsty tendencies of the Judge or Glanton). This aspect of violence is also just as apparent in other whalers. Late in *Moby-Dick*, Starbuck, an otherwise "upright, honest man," entertains "an evil thought" when covetously eyeing a row of muskets sitting in a rack below deck, though "so blent with its neutral or good accompaniments that for the instant he hardly knew it for itself" (450). Ahab is so consumed by his occupation, and later preoccupation with Moby Dick, that he allows forty years to pass without spending even three ashore with the wife and son he somehow manages to accumulate.

Because the scalp hunters of *Blood Meridian* carry out an inherently more violent and morally dubious task and represent a slightly more unified front than Melville's whalers, the Judge is by far the best example of savagery among the Glanton gang. James Dorson points out that violence and the Judge "are as intimately connected…as gravity and mass," and certainly the Judge seems not only an unerring participant in violence but also its utterly willing recipient (107). He treats violence as tantamount to a holy occupation, going so far as to claim that war is "the ultimate trade" and was always awaiting the human race, its "ultimate practitioner" (259). Perhaps more importantly in this passage, the Judge maintains perfect clarity about violence being at the core of human nature but is never repulsed by it in the least, in a sense making him the most violent and savage of all. Though DeLillo concentrates most of his meditation on violence elsewhere, he does make sure to draw attention to the "animal awe and desolation" that rises forcefully and totally unbidden from the crowd attending the opening baseball game (32). Additionally, when the ball lands in the stands and Cotter Martin gets caught in a struggle to take possession of it, his adversary turns out to be Bill Waterson, a grown man who had been perfectly civil and friendly moments before but who now has no qualms about fighting a boy over an object with no intrinsic value. As noted in "Contemporary American Fiction and the Confluence of Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, Philip Roth, and John Updike: A Roundtable Discussion," DeLillo proves unequivocally that "possibility and innocence [do] not exist independently of the violence that's endemic [to America]" (152).

In spite of its seemingly universal destructiveness and alarming depth of depravity, the purpose of violence in these novels is not merely to prove that America is a violent place, although the significance of violence in our history and culture cannot be understated. To an extent, violence reveals itself in these novels as a necessary evil, hideous as it may be. After the

Pequod's whalers manage to harpoon an old bull whale, Ishmael acknowledges that, in spite of the dishonor he feels at killing the venerable animal, "it must…be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men [by being made into candles], and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all" (321). It is a fundamental law of nature that certain life forms must hunt others for the survival of predator and prey. Though the men of the Pequod do not participate in whaling to cull any particular species or otherwise benefit the natural world around them, the aforementioned law is clearly at the forefront of their minds.

Regarding the violence of *Blood Meridian*, Patrick Shaw contends that "by accepting the human-ness of violence one can avoid intellectual and physical servitude," though the cost of this "will most probably be horrific" (105). With an honest appraisal of American history, it's immediately clear that the settling (and theft) of this country from the Native Americans, and thus the civilization we take for granted today, is founded on violence, much of it ruthless and unregulated. Though one can easily argue that professional sports like those *Underworld* depicts carry too much weight in American society, they undeniably provide an outlet for impulses and desires that otherwise would almost certainly culminate in bloodshed. Similarly, the nuclear testing and development so often criticized in the novel was a necessity for America to maintain our security and standing on the world stage following the second World War. Moreover, America has a long history of using violence to achieve some manner of liberty, whether at home or abroad, and the general notion of violence as being a legitimate means of achieving this has been and continues to be a guiding light in American thought.

In light of the rather nihilistic views informing and being expressed by these novels, one might rightfully wonder what we as Americans are to do. On one hand, these novels are not

entirely void of solutions. After meeting Queequeg and already having his expectations of the "savage" subverted, Ishmael comments that "perhaps, to be true philosophers, we mortals should not be conscious of so living or so striving" (62). To be sure, the real issue is not whether there are secrets or unresolved questions in America, but whether we truly wish to know the answers to them. The question isn't whether isolation or profound good and evil are facts of American life, but rather what we're to do about them. The task at hand isn't determining if violence is at the core of human nature, but to ascertain how this nation might use it well and avoid allowing it to descend into total immorality. Perhaps a better use of our energies isn't attempting to navigate the possibility of redemption or wondering what we might do with it, but to learn to navigate a country without it and all that can be accomplished without its assistance. After all, the intellectual exploration of these novels and their characters is just as unhindered as their physical wanderings, and as is apparent in art and life, it's never too late for Americans to depart into uncharted territory.

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